

How to Write the College Application Essay

It's Gotta Be You

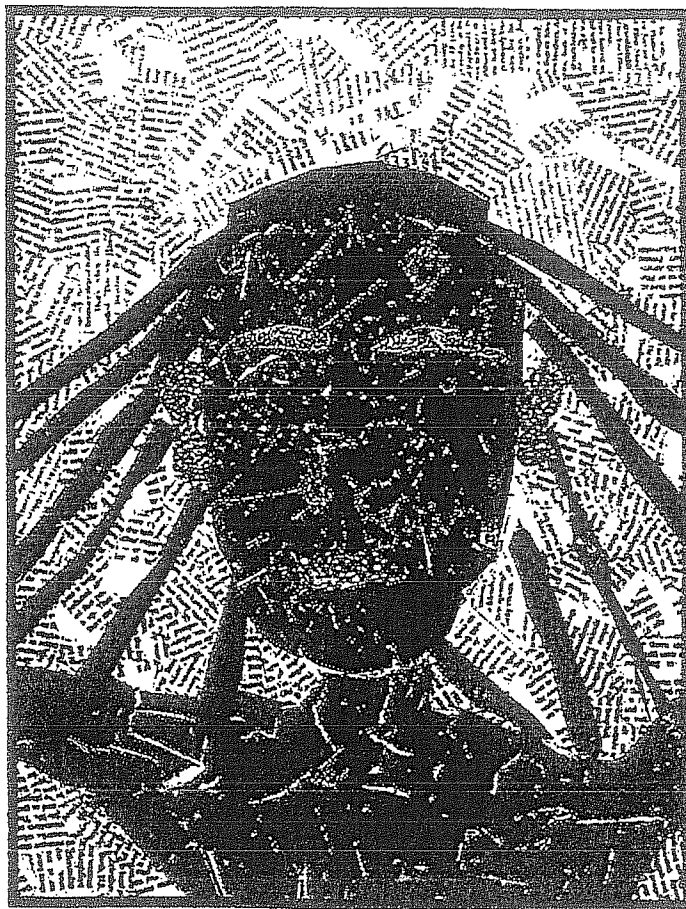
by Zoë Kashner

How much does your transcript say about you? How about your SAT scores? In certain ways, not much. No matter what your grades and test scores are, they don't capture—or communicate—who you really are.

Almost any college or university you apply to wants to know more about you than your grades or test scores can tell them. This is why they have you write an essay. The essay question may be "Describe a person who influenced you," or "Tell us why you and this school are a good match,"—some colleges don't even have a specific question, but will ask, "What more do we need to know about you?" Whatever the question, the essay gives you a chance to show aspects of your personality and abilities that can't be easily quantified—your sense of humor, your dedication to social justice, your strong sense of tradition and family.

I graduated from college a year ago last June, but I clearly remember the agonizing process of writing the essay. I'd stare at the computer screen, my mind filled with questions. What makes me different from other people? What kind of essay will let them see that I'm mature enough for college, and have the brains and personality to do well there?

These are big questions, and I can't answer them for you. But you can answer them for yourself. To help get you started, I consulted the experts at some popular colleges and universities, and have put together a strategy that



"SELF PORTRAIT" BY KIMBERLY LINDSEY Lincoln, RI

should make the essay-writing experience a lot easier, and maybe even fun!

Putting Pen to Paper

Most application essays require no research, no five-paragraph structure, and no bibliography. However, waiting until the last minute to write is not a good idea. You need time to brainstorm, to write multiple drafts. It's the one part of your application that can truly reflect your personality, and it's worth making the effort to show yourself clearly.

"The hardest part is getting started," says Steve Colee, director of admissions at Macalaster College. "I sometimes advise students to do a quick and informal survey of people they trust,

maybe teachers, or parents if they have that kind of relationship. They should ask: "When you think of me, what qualities stand out?"

You might also want to try keeping a pad of paper with you at all times. Write down ideas as they occur to you. If you keep a journal, read over your old entries. Write letters. Practice getting your thoughts down on paper.

All About You

"The key is for people to write what they think is important for us to know, not what they think we want to hear," notes Eric Kaplan, associate dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania. Write about things that interest you. Include details of your academic accomplishments, but don't just reiterate your statistics.

Be patient with your own false starts. I wasted two weeks working on an essay entitled, "What I Learned From Failing the Driver's License Test Six Times." It may seem to you, as it did to my mother, to be the perfect humorous starting point, but it didn't work for me—I found my repeated failure to legally take the wheel more infuriating than funny. The point is, if humor is your strong suit, go for it. If not, don't feel that you have to be a comedian. The same goes for "meaningful moments" about the death of the dog you hated, or the trip to China when you were 2 years old. If you initially choose a topic that just doesn't work, brainstorm again, and find something else.

Editing Yourself

"Presentation is important," says Kaplan. "We read the essays very

carefully." This means that a spellchecker isn't going to cut it as your sole editing device. Even if you're a grammar pro, you probably want to have several sets of eyes run over your final draft.

Remember to write clearly and plainly, as well. The easier your essay is to read, the more attention the reader can pay to what you have to say.

Don't forget to back up general statements about your interests with examples. Don't just say, "I feel ready to take on the challenges of a big-city education." Explain how you thought your decision through, and what it means to you. Make sure to give enough information about yourself that the reader isn't left thinking, "Wow, this was a polished essay, but I don't know anything about the writer!"

And be creative, but not at the expense of clarity or communication. "In the past, we received a lot of essays that are very creative," says Michael McCawley, associate director of admissions at the University of California at Santa Cruz, "But we really need to know more about the student in particular areas."

Do Not Freak Out. Repeat: Do Not Freak Out.

Colleges and universities work under the assumption that as a high school graduate, you still have a lot to learn. "We aren't looking for something flawless," says Kaplan, "We understand that you're 18 years old. We aren't expecting Fitzgerald."

Don't be afraid to be young and inexperienced. If you've never traveled the world, never fought off a bear, never discovered the cure to a rare disease, it's okay! "We like youthful optimism," says Kaplan. "We love it when students don't yet know what they want to do."

I sure didn't know what I wanted to do with my life when I was 18 years old. I ended up writing my essay about my five fabulous career fantasies: botany, book criticism, forestry, art, and world travel. Reading it over five years later I realize it was a little dewy-eyed and not exactly brilliant. Despite this, I can still see myself in it—and that's the key.

Three Real Essays: *Two That Work, and One that Doesn't*

I ■ *An Essay About a Change in Your Life*

I used to be a pretty deep guy. I watched foreign films, read Nietzsche, and stayed up all night "contemplating jazz." I was Jack Kerouac living in a fire hut on top of Desolation Peak. I was Gary Snyder seeking enlightenment in a Buddhist monastery in Thailand. I was Ken Kesey, Jimi Hendrix, and Timothy Leary all rolled up into one gigantic mess of pseudo-intellectual, adolescent, fancy boarding school beat poet wannabe. I was a moron.

I blew off my schoolwork, not because I was lazy, but because I thought that schoolwork was shallow, too insignificant for me, the vivacious intellectual, the dharma bum, the Zen lunatic wanderer. How could my teachers expect me to do homework when life around me was all so futile, so meaningless? I was sure that I was a tortured soul destined to lead a life full of angst and pain.

That was last fall, more than a year ago. In February of last year, I left my hipster friends and their coffee-house conversations behind, to move back to the suburbs of Philadelphia and my conservative, unhip public high school. Suburban Philadelphia is not the easiest place in the world to be sixties-cool and stylish. There aren't many smoke-filled coffee houses or hippie wanderers. It's clean here, upper middle class—you know, the Ford Explorer, Saturday evening Mass, country club for dinner scene. I came back to Philadelphia because it isn't all that "hip," because there is nothing "profound" to do. I came home to get myself together. It

was time to grow up.

I'm not as cool as I used to be. I never do anything very exciting or off the wall, at least not by my old standards. My friends from boarding school have for the most part become nothing more than distant memories. They're all off in New York City or Mexico pretending to work on their spirituality, but really just partying their lives away. I stay home a lot. I'm at the library a couple of nights a week. I read, I write letters, I do some painting.

Last weekend, I watched *The Color Purple* with my mom, collected some weather data for a chemistry project, and had a tea party with my little sister. I've been spending time with the people I met in my high school production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, too. I feel balanced; I feel like myself, I no longer want to tend bar in Tangiers or meditate in Sri Lanka—all right, maybe I do, but not right now. For so long, I wanted to be other people, to be a cultural icon, a legend in my own time. But in reality, I'm nothing like Keith Richards. Honestly, I'm a little scared of sex and drugs. I worry about pimples, whether my parents are still happily married, where I'm going to be next year.

I came home, I grew up, I got my life back together. I'm still trying to find balance, but I no longer feel like a reckless child. I was sure that I could get away from myself by just pretending that I was someone else. But right now, I'm not looking to be "on the road." I'm pretty happy being right where I am.

Why It Works

This writer provides convincing details behind a basic change in his life—improved academic performance. The essay shows maturity, a sense of humor, and a refreshing lack of pretentiousness.

Writing Your Own

Have you learned something new about yourself during high school? Everyone has gone through changes, and explaining the details of your experience can make a great essay.

ESSAY DOS

- Choose a subject that you're passionate about.
- Write several rough drafts.
- Answer the question asked.
- Tailor your essay to each college or university you apply to.
- Include specific details that make the experience yours and no one else's.
- Develop a structured essay — draw the reader in with an enticing opening, develop your ideas logically, and end smoothly.
- Write plainly, and with correct spelling and grammar.
- Write something you'd like to read. Remember, your essay is being read by other human beings, not machines.

and DON'TS

- Never express cynicism about the point of writing an essay.
- Never write about how you couldn't figure out what to write about.
- Never write something witty that says nothing about what's important to you.
- Never rely solely on a spellchecker.
- Never break the rules about length, topic, or format.
- Never let parents, teachers, or friends get so involved that the essay stops being about you.

2. An Essay About Someone Important To You

I have always wanted to take his picture there in rehearsal, when he stands in the middle of a semicircle of upturned eyes and open mouths, waving his endless arms as though he were swimming through the music. At eight-thirty in the morning, when the rest of us are barely awake, Johannes Somary is at his lovable best. The sun opposite me shines on the sopranos and altos and silhouettes his aristocratic nose, shaggy brows, and frizz of hair against the window pane and the morning sky.

"Rrrroll your R's!" he says. Then he stomps and wiggles, bellows and whispers, puts his fingers to his chin as if in prayer and opens his blue eyes so wide they seem to leap out directly into mine, to discover that mine are closed; I am nodding asleep to the march rhythms of Handel's Mass in Time of War. But not for long. He goes through every conceivable contortion and exertion to energize our eighty sleepy faces. It is as if his wild gestures could conduct electricity as well as music through the drowsy air into our voices. Sometimes I wonder what he would do if we returned in kind, bugging our eyes out, wriggling and twisting our bodies to the music. As it is, we continue to hold our notes too long or not long enough and we refuse to "dance" with the 3/4 time.

Every once in a while he launches into a boiling tirade. He "Swisses out." Then he reverts to European discipline: "If not every person is in this room at exactly eighteen minutes past eight o'clock, there will be no concert." He is the quintessential Swiss in other ways as well: we must learn to speak English, not Americanese, we must not be "cool" when singing Haydn, we must

get eight hours of sleep, be prompt, attentive, enunciate our consonants, and think about nothing else. This is the law according to Somary.

It works. His ridiculous energy and steaming rages do make us sit straighter, hold our scores higher and try a little harder. When he pleads, "Both feet on the floor—you cannot hope to sing if you do not support yourself," there is a second or two of shuffling and creaking as 160 legs are crossed and uncrossed. Then he spreads his own feet wide and arches his back a little, sticking out his pot belly and hitching up his belt. He's forever tucking in a stubborn shirt tail set free by quick tempi or forte passages. There is a lot of child in him. He can glower as furiously as a two-year when he says "Elephants have memories, people have pencils—write it down!" Or he can smile so widely and coyly that I am afraid his grin will devour his ears and, like Beethoven, he will have to conduct from memory.

Of all my teachers, I feel the most loyalty to him because he devotes his entire self to his work. He does more than just wheedle a Haydn Mass out of us at a sleepy hour. His endless arm is as ready to wrap itself around my shoulders with a reassuring squeeze as it is to gyrate in 4/4 time, and he gives advice and drops of Somary-wisdom as freely as musical instruction. When he sits behind his messy desk after rehearsal and we sprawl—legs, arms, charter, book bags—on the couch in his comfortable office, he looks like a complacent Swiss Buddha, nodding and smiling those blue eyes at us, always there, always quirky, always inspiring to me.

Why It Works

This is an essay about someone else, but we learn a lot about the writer as well. She respects dedication, discipline, and kindness. She enjoys writing, and does it well. All these details make the essay a good personal statement, one that will impress its readers.

Writing Your Own

Choose someone you respect, and make a list of notes about him or her. Include details about what the person looks like, how he or she behaves, things he or she says. Use your notes to develop a strong portrait of someone you admire.

3. An Essay About Yourself

weak opening-
needs better lead

If someone were to ask me to describe myself, I

goal are like.

what does
this mean to
you?

would have to say that I am a person of many interests. I enjoy (a simple life), yet I am not afraid to try new things.

One of the most relaxing hobbies I enjoy is cooking. When time permits, I bake and I prepare special meals for my family. I learned how to cook through various cooking courses that I took when I was younger. In high school, I could only fit one food preparation class into my program.

Travel, dancing,
sports & now
cooking!

passive voice!

I have been fortunate enough to become exposed to a variety of life-styles at a very early age. During my travels to Europe I was able to visit Germany, Italy, and Switzerland. There, I learned about different cultures and how other people live. Watching and meeting people is one of the many things that I enjoy.

Along with this class, I enjoyed a variety of other courses in high school. However, the ones I liked the most were jewelry, Italian, and history. I believe, though, that I made the most out of every course I took in high school.

General info is
not necessary,
They already
have your
transcript.

what?

Since the age of four, I have been dancing with "Dance Capri," a countrywide Italian-American folk-dancing group. My involvement in this organization has introduced me to people who are interested in the same things I am. We enjoy learning about our Italian heritage and pride ourselves in keeping up the folk-dancing tradition.

Out of school, I invest a good deal of time in various part-time jobs. My work experience includes cashier and hostess work in an Italian restaurant, and my present job, which is working as a Gal Friday in an insurance office. I also baby-sit when I have the time.

Again, another
new topic

what does
this mean to
you?

Along with dancing, traveling, and meeting new people, I enjoy skiing and gymnastics. I usually ski in Vermont during my vacations, but last year I had the opportunity to ski in Quebec, Canada, for a week. I have always been on gymnastics teams, during the school year and the summer, and although I never

High school was and still is a time of growing and maturing for me. Although working hard and getting good grades has always been my first priority, I also established and set many of the values that guide my life today. I can confidently say that in my senior year of high school I am ready to meet the challenges of college. I am ready to move on, and I see a bright future ahead of me.

A heavy topic
that deserves
some
attention

This is the
4th enjoy

won any special honors, I enjoy competitive gymnastics meets, especially the balance beam. For me, competing with a team has taught me what working for one common cause and reaching one common

Why It Doesn't Work

Did you enjoy reading this? Do you feel like you know the writer better? Probably not. This essay lists the writer's myriad interests, but says nothing about why they matter to her. There are many interesting essays hidden in this piece, but we don't get to read them. She could have described visiting Italy, and her experiences there as an Italian-American. She could have explained what it is

about cooking that enralls her. She could have explored the idea of tradition and explained why it matters to her. By mentioning so many different activities without delving into the details on any of them, the writer sells herself short.

How To Avoid Writing This Essay

Any one of us could write an essay like this—general, distant, and

unfocused. Re-read this piece and circle items that could be developed into a strong essay (e.g. "Although I never won any honors, I enjoy competitive gymnastics meets"). Cross out items that are too general, or unsubstantiated. When you write your own essay, try to be just as tough. It's scary to reveal things about yourself, but it's better than not giving the reader details they need to understand your point of view.

Character Traits

Characters (and real-life people) have unique attributes called traits.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Honest• Light-hearted• Leader• Expert• Brave• Conceited• Mischievous• Demanding• Thoughtful• Keen	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bright• Courageous• Serious• Funny• Humorous• Sad• Poor• Rich• Tall• Dark	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Humble• Friendly• Short• Adventurous• Hard-working• Timid• Shy• Bold• Daring• Dainty
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Happy• Disagreeable• Simple• Fancy• Plain• Excited• Studious• Inventive• Creative• Thrilling• Independent• Intelligent• Compassionate• Gentle• Proud• Wild• Messy• Neat• Joyful• Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Light• Handsome• Pretty• Ugly• Selfish• Unselfish• Self-confident• Respectful• Considerate• Imaginative• Busy• Patriotic• Fun-loving• Popular• Successful• Responsible• Lazy• Dreamer• Helpful• Simple-minded	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pitiful• Cooperative• Lovable• Prim• Proper• Ambitious• Able• Quiet• Curious• Reserved• Pleasing• Bossy• Witty• Fighter• Tireless• Energetic• Cheerful• Smart• Impulsive• Loyal

Writing the College Application Essay

If the thought of writing a few hundred words that will decide your fate for the next four years has you paralyzed ...

take a deep breath.

You can do it.

Here's the scene: You and your trusty thesaurus sit in your room, surrounded by piles of college applications, guidebooks, and a lifetime's worth of expectations. On the desk before you is an innocuous piece of paper, but it poses a topic—something like, "Tell Your Life Story"—that you must answer in writing, and it better be good. As you sit there, you might have a question of your own: What Do These People Want From Me?!

They Want You

What they—the admissions officers of your chosen schools—want from you is something only you can give: *You*. They want you to write about who you are, and what you love: "Students should write about something that they are genuinely committed to," says the University of Pennsylvania's dean of admissions, Lee Stetson. "Something they are passionate about."

Kirsten French, senior assistant director of admissions at Rice University in Houston, Texas, notes, "What's important is each student's voice. The essay

should reflect a real aspect of their personality, and be written in a style that's comfortable for them."

The subject you choose matters less than your passion about it. "If I were to pick one element of the essay that's most critical," adds Stetson, "I'd have to choose content. We are asking students to tell us who they are and what matters to them, which is not easy for anyone at any age."

What if I'm (Gasp!) Not Perfect?

"If the student can convey a sense of genuineness, that's important," says Jim Rawlins, admissions counselor at the University of Washington. He adds that the essay is an opportunity for students to make themselves known as more than a bunch of test scores. "For instance, people for whom grades may be a little shaky can show us that they have learned from their mistakes. The essay can demonstrate their growth and maturity. Through the essay, we can see that even if the GPA is a little low, the student still has the potential to excel in college, because he or she has figured out what matters, and how to do it."

"Sometimes kids think they have to be spectacular and dazzle us," says David

Arredondo, associate director of admissions at Oberlin College, in Oberlin, Ohio. But at age 16 or 17, he adds, "not everyone's had an earth-shattering life." He cited one memorable essay in which a student wrote about being ashamed of the car his father drove. The student's parents were immigrants to the United States, and had struggled in this country. The essay described the student's learning to appreciate his family's accomplishments. Arredondo praised the essay, saying it depicted a "hardworking kid, who might have to struggle, but will probably do well, and get a lot out of an Oberlin education."

Why Them?

Admissions officers also want to know why a student wants to attend their school: "I like to know why the University of Washington is their choice," says Rawlins. "Do we have a degree program that interests them, or is there another compelling reason that they want to come here?"

Citing a school's distinctive programs or educational philosophy and why they interest you is a good idea. "We ask, What influence do you expect a Morehouse education to have on you?"

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says Mark Hatcher, associate director of recruiting at Morehouse College, in Atlanta. "If you don't know anything about our school, then you don't know the benefits of coming here."

Admissions officers see themselves as being responsible to their school as a whole. They are building a freshman class, which must become a successful part of the college or university at large. Through the essay, they hope to find out if each applicant can be a valuable member of the community. "We're looking to discern qualities of character," notes Oberlin's Arredondo. He cited a student who spent the essay picking apart the topic question, and ridiculing the application process. "We ask ourselves, Would we want to room with this person?" adds Arredondo. "If the answer is no, how can we, in good conscience, admit that applicant?"

Presentation Matters!

You wouldn't go to a job interview unbathed, would you? How you present yourself matters both in person and on paper. "We get close to 4,000 applications every year," says Morehouse's Hatcher. "And a staff of three reads each one. We ask applicants to write neatly or type. The manner in which you present your essay is truly representative of you."

It goes without saying—but is worth saying anyway—that you should review your essay for spelling and grammatical errors, and to make sure it has a solid, coherent structure. Hatcher says he's never turned down an application solely on the basis of an essay, but he has recommended that a student's admission be contingent upon his or her enrolling in remedial classes.

Avoid the Wrong Kinds of Help

Rice University's French says she sees essays all the time that reflect the guides the student has been reading, rather than the person who is writing the essay. "There's a lot of advice out there. As admissions get more selective, there are businesses offering to help or to actually write a student's essay." The result, says French, is that schools are seeing "more canned" essays, which admissions officers can spot pretty easily. She added, "It is possible to be overcounseled. Remember, the only person who can write the essay successfully is you."

Model Essays

Three examples of successful college application essays follow.

As you read them, try to identify why they are effective.

Then review the suggestions for writing your own essay.

An Essay About an Influential Person

Susie turned in her seat and leaned toward the radiator to secretly read the latest issue of our school newspaper, *Tom-Tom*. She wore her *Tom-Tom* shirt proudly each time the paper was published. Regardless of how much I pleaded, Susie would not let me see the paper before everyone received one during seventh hour. Susie's dedication and pride in *Tom-Tom* made a lasting impression on me.

After class one day, Susie approached me, asking if I would like to write a story for *Tom-Tom*. I am still not sure what made me agree to try. Susie assured me that she would help me, but made it clear that she knew I could do a good job on my own. I had recently decided that I needed to start overcoming my fears of rejection and get more involved in school activities. So I pulled together all of my courage and accepted the assignment.

Susie continued to encourage me and bring me story assignments. I spent hours writing, rewriting, and editing each story I wrote. My family was forced to hear each one many times over as I asked for advice. In April, Susie made sure that I had an application for the staff and that I was planning to apply.

I spent hours preparing myself for rejection before the staff list was posted. I did not realize how completely unnecessary my worrying was until last year, however. After finals, some friends and I went out to lunch. At the restaurant I saw the former newspaper sponsor and said hello. She congratulated me on our final issue and for being selected as the Editor-in-Chief of *Tom-Tom*. When she casually mentioned that she and Russell (the Editor-in-Chief my freshman year) had not only agreed that I should be on the staff, but that I could also eventu-

ally become the editor, I excused myself and rushed to the bathroom so that I could digest this overwhelming news by myself.

"Hey Jill—I'm counting on you to add some strength to *Tom-Tom*—next year looks like it may be rough, but I really think you'll do well—you've got what it takes to go the distance," wrote Susie in my yearbook. When there are problems on the staff now—and Susie was right about the rough year that followed—I think of her. Sometimes I get so frustrated with people that I want to quit. But I never do. Susie made me love *Tom-Tom* more than anything else in the school. Even when I want to, I cannot turn away. I would disappoint myself.

Susie had (and still has) a great influence on me. She showed me an ideal for the newspaper and for myself. Now I am aiming even higher than that ideal. Susie gave me confidence in myself at a time I needed it badly. I can see now that I already had the skills and drive, but that I needed a push. Susie gave me the push and I will never forget it. Now I owe it to her to give someone else the same push.

—Jill Troy
Stanford University

Why It Works

Though the subject matter is not the most unusual, Jill has made some smart decisions in her approach. The essay describes Susie, but its real subject is Jill and her growth and maturity. The piece paints a portrait of Jill as a person who recognizes her weaknesses, challenges herself, listens to others, and cares about herself and the people around her.

Writing on Your Own

If there is someone in your life who serves as a role model for you, you have a strong essay topic. As Jill did, don't just describe the person and her sterling qualities. Instead, make sure to tell the story of how she affected you. And use dialogue and description to make your essay more interesting.

An Essay About Goals

Mental Block is a nasty old hermit who lives in the gullies and ravines of my mind. He makes a living by slinging nets across my neural canals and catches my thoughts as they swim toward the great spawning grounds where writing is born. M.B. always waits until his nets are full to the point of bursting before he drags them up. Like any experienced fisherman, he saves only the big, healthy, mature thoughts and throws juvenile or diseased thoughts back into the canals to swim or die. Those thoughts he saves, he either eats immediately or freezes and sets aside for use when my stream of creativity slows.

Up until three weeks ago, I had always ignored M.B.; his paltry catch consisted of only a small fraction of my thoughts. Lately, however, with college

essays to write, M.B. has become an increasingly irritating problem. Many of my best thoughts begin their journey through my mind only to be poached and eaten before they can breed and create others like them.

So, with college deadlines looming, I set off in search of the old hermit, determined to somehow halt his activities, if only temporarily. Finding him was no problem. The recent flood of thoughts accompanying my latest attempts at creativity had so fattened him that he was uninclined to move about. Instead, he sat in the center of my mind at the junction of a number of important canals, wielding his net with practiced expertise. M.B. pulled in one load after another, emptying them from his nets in a flopping, jumbled tangle.

He frowned when he saw me approaching and shifted to face me, his motion scattering the skeletons of coun-

less thoughts. I picked my way toward him, through heaps of such skeletons, stopping at the base of a particularly large one upon which M.B. was seated. "What cha want?" he snapped, peering down at me over his massive, bloated waistline. Before I could reply, he angrily muttered, "C'mon, ya gotta want something; you ain't one ta come visitin' fer no reason."

"I want to make a deal," I replied.

"A deal, with me, how nice of ya, now what kinda deal were ya thinkin' of makin', my boy?" he said, his lips curling into a sneer.

"I want you to stop stealing my thoughts until after college deadlines."

"And if I should do this?" he interjected.

"I'll do whatever you want."

"Well, my boy, let me tell you." He paused, shifting into a more comfortable posture. "I'll make this deal with ya if ye'll do me two things."

"What two things?" I asked, dreading his answer.

M.B. picked up a bone and began to wave it at me in schoolteacher fashion. "You know, my boy, I've been doin' this job fer sometime now, seventeen years at last count, and over this time yer thoughts have been gettin' progressively better. Over these last four years, boy, not only has the fishin' improved, but yer thoughts have been bigger, healthier, and more mature."

"So what are the two things?" I questioned, irritated.

He ignored me. "Especially when ya tried ta write poetry last year, my, that was some good fishin'; and that term paper, 'Richard III and The Prince: the Villain and the Pragmatist,' whooo whew, that was some good eatin'."

"No wonder I could never write poetry or organize that stupid paper," I muttered under my breath.

"Well, gettin' back to my point, I'll stop my fishin'—fer the time bein'—if ye'll apply to Haverford and take liberal arts if ya get in."

"What?!!!!"

"See boy, the thing is, if ya get into Haverford, I figure ye'll have so many term papers and stuff ta write that I'll be feastin' regular fer more'n four years."

"But what about the liberal arts?"

"Well, boy, in my many years at this fishin', I've caught yer liberal-arts

Using the Net

There is a wealth of information about colleges and the application process on the Internet.

Here are a few sites we like:

■ **College Web Sites.** Almost every college is online with an e-mail address. Many have their own Web sites that provide information about the school, and, in some cases, offer an actual online application with essay questions!

■ **Search Engines.** Yahoo, a popular search engine, has an entire subcategory for college applications and offers links to hundreds of admissions offices, financial aid sources, and a category for colleges that have online applications, including essay ques-

tions. Go to: http://www.yahoo.com/Education/Higher_Education/College_Entrance.

■ **Businesses.** College prep companies, like Stanley Kaplan, The Princeton Review, and others, have Web sites. These sites will either charge a fee for services, or subject you to advertising. One interesting site with a quiz designed to match you up with suitable schools is The Princeton Review's "CounselorOmatic." Go to: <http://www.review.com/time/CounselorOmatic>.

■ **Usegroups.** UseNet usegroups are like worldwide bulletin boards: You can ask a question and get feedback via e-mail or a reply posted to the group. The usegroups soc.college.admissions and soc.college.financial_aid are places to seek out information about

schools and the application process. You can subscribe to specific newsgroups through an Internet service provider like one of those listed below.

■ **Online Services.** The major online services—America Online, CompuServe, Prodigy, and the Microsoft Network—offer original content for their subscribers on thousands of topics, including college admissions.

Remember Net Etiquette: If you know your way around the Net, then you're aware of basic on line protocol. If you're a "newbie," keep in mind these basic rules: Don't type in all caps; don't give out your full name, address and phone number, or user password (or your parents' credit-card number); and turn off the computer occasionally and go outside!

thoughts and I've caught yer science and math thoughts, and, when ya get right down to it, yer liberal-arts thoughts are just much tastier. They're so much more natural and healthy. Them science and math thoughts just taste so processed and mechanical. It's like the difference between filet mignon and Spam, see?"

"Yeah, I do," I replied. "You got a deal."

M.B. held out his great, pudgy hand, which I grabbed and shook. "Ye'll know when I'm back in business," he said, giving me a wink.

"And by the way," he shouted, as I walked away. "You better get into Haverford; I ain't starvin' fer nothin'."

—Arun Ramanathan
Haverford College

Why It Works

In a clever and arresting essay, Arun answers one of the most important questions colleges ask: Why do you want to come here, and what will you do for the next four years? By creating a character out of the problem of Mental Block he reveals that his interests lie in the liberal arts. Note how interesting Arun makes the character of Mental Block through his use of witty description and terrific dialogue.

Writing on Your Own

If you can personify an obstacle you face in a distinctive way, you might want to try Arun's approach. Start by writing a dialogue between you and your obstacle. What does your obstacle look like? What does it say to you? How does it speak? How do you respond?

An Essay Based on a Quotation

"There is a penalty for incorrect answers. You will neither gain nor lose points for omitted questions."—SAT instructions

If I try, and I make a mistake, life penalizes me. However, if I never try, I remain not only unharmed, but also unchanged. In my life I choose the "To Try Road." Traffic builds up often, and accidents occur regularly, but even with these deterrents I will pick it every time. I refuse to follow the other road—where the stoplights are always red and the speed limit is so slow that

the car must be put in neutral. A driver goes nowhere on that road, and I can not accept that way of life for my daily routine. "To try is to risk failure. But the risk must be taken."

The trek up Mount Elbert was a tremendous risk. The clouds showed a possibility of snow that morning, and if the snow began to fall while we were on the mountain we would immediately have to turn around and hike down. As Leader of the Day, I had to make the final decision whether or not to go. Climbing to the top of the tallest mountain in Colorado was our dream and goal for the last two weeks. How could we not go? What if I decided the group would stay back and the snow never fell? We had always taken pride in challenging ourselves, and this day was no different. "Pick up your backpacks. We're going."

After four hours of hiking, we shut out the thought of snow and concentrated on the marvelous view awaiting our arrival at the top. We were literally ten minutes away from the top when I felt a snowflake hit me in the face. "Everybody stop!" I looked at the hopeful tired faces of my closest friends, and I knew I was about to steal away their dream. I heard my own voice announce, "We can not continue to the top. We have to turn around now ... Let's go." Faces of hope changed to faces of devastation, and I felt wholly responsible for the melancholy that now hovered over the group.

The SAT was right. I made an error blindly wishing us to the top, and I suffered the penalty. I watched the people who had supported me with warm smiles and words of encouragement enter into a frightening depression, and regardless of how desperately I tried I could not pull them out. However, to this day I believe our attempt to climb the peak brought more value to us than harm. In great attempts, it is glorious even to fail.

Therefore I chose to take the risk, and I continue to make that decision because observing from the sidelines of life and omitting questions never satisfies me. So I mark *a* or *b* or even *e*, but leaving the question blank never got me to the top of my mountain.

—Anonymous,
University of Pennsylvania

Why It Works

In response to the request to write about a quotation, this writer made the inventive choice to use a quote from an instruction on the SAT to frame a discussion about her value system. She then effectively combined the intellectual elements of the essay with description of a personal experience that put her values to the test. The writer reveals what is important to her, how she pursues challenges, and takes responsibility for her choices.

Writing on Your Own

If you know of a quote that summarizes one of your deeply held beliefs, you have the start of a strong essay. Remember: Incorporate a description of a personal experience that shows how the quote and its meaning are active in your life. The quote doesn't have to be earth-shattering, but the meaning you make from it should be authentic and strong. And don't forget to use dialogue and description to make your essay come alive.

College Essay Tip Sheet

1 *Start early.* Write your essay early, and don't invest too much in the first draft. Just write it, put it away, and return to it later with a fresh eye.

2 *Choose your subject carefully.* The more passion you have about your subject, the better. If you are asked to respond to a specific question, make sure you do!

3 *Consider your audience.* What does your audience already know about you from transcripts and test scores? Give them something more.

4 *Humor works.* Again, consider your audience—the poor admissions officer slogging through hundreds or thousands of essays. Wouldn't you want a good laugh if that were you?

5 *Get feedback, but not too much.* Share your essay with someone you trust. But don't show it to the whole world.

6 *Proofread!* Do it yourself, and get a reliable reader to go over every sentence for spelling and grammatical errors.

Polishing the Personal Statement

One of the greatest stumbling blocks for many applicants is writing an effective personal statement. Often, they are intimidated. Instead, they should view the personal statement as an opportunity to distinguish themselves as individuals in the eyes of the reader, according to UC Berkeley Admissions Director Pamela Burnett and UC Santa Cruz Associate Admissions Director Michael McCawly, who presented a workshop at the UC Counselor Conferences in September to discuss the role of the essay and offer guidelines for writing a powerful one.

"Since we don't conduct interviews, we look to the personal statement to provide us with contextual information about an applicant," Burnett says. "In writing the essay, students should ask themselves what they want us to know about them, not what they think we want to hear."

Students can use the personal statement to fill in the gaps or explain unusual circumstances. For instance, some students take classes that are outside the UC-approved course list but that could be useful in their future endeavors, and the personal statement is the place where they can highlight that. Applicants can discuss their extracurricular activities and community service, but they should avoid repeating information contained elsewhere in the application. Admissions staff want to know what students have gained from their involvement, an illustration of their motivation, initiative and leadership qualities.

Applicants who have experienced hardship may discuss their circumstances in the personal statement, but they should remember that, again, what's important is to show how they faced challenges and

matured through commitment, persistence and determination. On the other hand, manufactured or exaggerated hardship is transparent and frowned upon. Even with comprehensive review, academic excellence remains paramount in the selection process.

Campuses give different weight to the personal statement. At Berkeley, for example, evaluators read every essay several times throughout the selection process, while at Santa Cruz, the essay is not as important in selection as it is in the awarding of scholarships. Faculty members of professional schools and colleges read the applications of students who have applied to those majors. Applicants are strongly encouraged to discuss their interest in their chosen area of study, showing a strong commitment to the field. If a student is applying to the School of Engineering at one campus, say, and another major at other campuses, it is still vital to weave some evidence of interest into the personal statement.

In addition to the general guidelines they provided, Burnett and McCawly offered some nuts-and-bolts tips for applicants:

- ▶ Follow instructions and answer the prompts.
- ▶ Write in your own voice, speaking honestly about yourself and where you have come from.
- ▶ Avoid lists of accomplishments; instead explain their relevance to your life.
- ▶ Limit the personal statement to two pages, typing it in a standard font of readable size.
- ▶ Start writing early and put the essay aside for a day or two before rereading, editing and proofreading.
- ▶ Be careful with humor. Writing for an unseen audience, an applicant can't judge the effect of his jokes, so it's safer to be straightforward in tone. ■



New Financial Aid Guides Available

Prospective UC students have two new publications from the Office of the President to draw on for information about financing their education.

University of California *Financing Guide for Transfer Students* and *Financing Guide for Parents & Students* provide step-by-step information and outline financing options, including grants and loans, for students with varying levels of need. Charts illustrate the costs of a University of California degree and aid calculations as well as loan repayment schedules.

The eight-page booklet for transfer students also touches on such topics as child care expenses and aid for foreign students, while the guide aimed at high school students dispels seven commonly held myths about financial aid. Rounding out both publications is a list of helpful resources.

Copies of *Financing Guide for Students & Parents* have been sent to campus Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) offices. California community colleges chief students services officers and campus financial aid directors have been sent copies of the *Financing Guide for Transfer Students*. Both publications are available in PDF format on the Web (<http://ucop.edu/sas/counselorconference2002>). ■

Writing Your Personal Statement

From Personal Statement UC Berkeley

<http://students.berkeley.edu/apa/personalstatement/index.htm>

Writing your personal statement can be one of the most satisfying--or frustrating--writing experiences you'll ever have.

The personal statement is an important part of your application package. Depending on the topic you choose, the essay you write provides additional evidence of your intellectual and creative achievement. The essay is also the only opportunity for the readers of your application to get a feel for you as a person as well as for you as a student. The essay is also the place where you can put your academic record into the context of your opportunities and obstacles.

There is no one correct way to write a personal statement, but in general those who will read your essay are looking for two important things:

- **HOW** the essay provides evidence of your achievements that isn't reflected in other parts of your application
- **HOW** and **WHY** the events that you describe have shaped your attitude, focus, and, most of all, your intellectual vitality.

This information will help you think about and craft a personal statement by taking you step by step through a process of brainstorming, drafting and revising. At the end, we hope that you will produce a personal statement that you are proud of and that will provide admissions officers with an accurate portrait of who you are and why a college education is important to you.

Brainstorming For Your Personal Statement

Brainstorming is the first stage of writing, often called "prewriting." Brainstorming is the process of gathering all of your ideas and getting them on paper without editing them.

The brainstorming stage does not involve editing, so don't censor your ideas. There will be enough time to edit later; right now you want to get all of your ideas down so that you don't forget anything. Brainstorming is NOT an outline, NOT a draft and certainly NOT an essay. The purpose of brainstorming is to write out ideas, thoughts, pieces of thoughts, without regard for their connections with each other. Structure and form are not important at this point. What is important is to get everything out of your head and onto paper.

Begin by creating a brainstorm sheet. Be totally honest! Ask yourself the following questions, and write out your answers.

- What are my strengths?
- What are my weaknesses?
- What is special about me?
- What kind of person am I?
- What do I care about?
- Why is (BLANK) more important to me than (BLANK)? (Fill in the blanks.)
- What is it like growing up in (BLANK)?
- What is it like going to school at (BLANK)?

Gathering Information and Developing a Theme

After you've completing your brainstorming, you'll want to filter the fruits of your brainstorming and identify ONE area you wish to pursue in more detail. Look for areas that might seem interesting or different to a reader. A good way to do this is to group similar ideas together to highlight patterns; these patterns can then uncover a potential theme for your essay. (Your essay's theme is its controlling idea.)

For example, if after brainstorming and grouping your ideas, you find that your talent for writing shows up in your hobby as a budding novelist, your community service as a teacher of creative writing to youngsters, your extracurricular work as a writer for the school newspaper, and your award for outstanding history essay, then you should consider focusing your essay around this talent and how this interest in writing shapes your place in the world and your goals.

Remember--it is the quality of your experience as you describe it that matters, not the number of experiences.

STEP ONE:

Begin to focus your thoughts by examining your actual experiences. Use the information you've uncovered through brainstorming to address the following topics.

- An achievement that made me feel terrific...
- Something I have struggled to overcome or change about myself or my life...
- An event or experience that taught me something special...
- A "real drag" of an experience that I had to get past...
- Someone's act of strength or courage that affected me...
- A family experience that influenced me in some powerful way...

- A lesson, class project, activity or job that had an impact on my academic or career goals...
- A time I blew it, failed, made bad choices, and how I got past it...
- Some memorable event or advice involving an older person...
- An event that helps to define me, in terms of my background...

STEP TWO:

Choose one or two of your favorite responses from the list above (or combine a couple that evoked similar responses). Check to make sure your written description addresses the following three questions. If it doesn't, add details so that the experience you describe will be vivid to a reader who doesn't know you.

1. What were the key moments and details of the event?
2. What did I learn from this event?
3. What aspect of this event stays with me most?

STEP THREE:

Decide on a theme for your essay. Taking the experience you wrote about in Step Two, answer the following questions:

- What does this event reveal about me?
- What makes it special or significant?
- How does this event make me special or make me stand out?
- What truth about me is revealed through this event?

Your answers will reveal your theme.

Structuring Your Personal Statement

A typical two-page personal statement will consist of the following:

- An introductory paragraph that provides your essay's controlling theme
- 2-4 body paragraphs that develop your theme through examples and detailed experiences and build upon each other. The final body paragraph will contain your most poignant information
- A conclusion that widens the lens and wraps up your essay without summarizing or repeating what has already been written

The Writing Process

Writing a good college essay requires a significant investment of personal reflection, thought and time. There are no right or wrong answers--you are who you are, after all. The best way to get in touch with who you are through writing is to undertake a process of self-exploration and writing that will culminate in an essay that will reveal how unique and interesting you are.

Using all the stages of the writing process will help you to

- Understand your essay's theme--its controlling idea
- Analyze and reflect upon your experiences as they relate to your theme
- Craft a polished essay

Drafting, Revising and Proofreading Your Personal Statement

A draft is a work in progress. A good essay undergoes several revisions--don't assume that your first draft is your best draft! Composing often involves going back and forth among planning the essay, generating ideas, organizing the contents, and editing the results. Drafting allow you to get the most out of these composing stages.

Through the brainstorming and gathering information stages, you have generated the raw material to compose effectively. Now you will begin the process of creating your essay.

Your First Draft

In a first draft, you are attempting to capture your essay's meaning and get it down on paper. In this way, you are attempting to draw out the essay's concept.

Use your first draft to:

- formulate a working introduction
- organize your ideas

A first draft is often the skeleton of the paper; it contains the overall structure, but may lack a clear theme, vivid language, fully developed paragraphs, and strong transition words and phrases.

Revising Your Draft

The key to revising your essay is to determine how it seems not just to you, but to your reader. So--think like an admissions officer! Remember that readers need a sense

of your essay's structure and a clear idea of why they should read your essay in the first place. To revise your essay:

Step One: Concentrate on the whole by examining your essay's frame: the introduction, the conclusion, and a sentence in each that states your main theme. Ask the following questions:

- Will my reader know where my introduction ends and where the body of my essay begins?
- Will my reader know where the body of my essay ends and where my conclusion begins?
- Will my reader know which sentence is the main sentence in my introduction, and which is the main sentence in my conclusion?

Step Two: Examine your essay for continuity

Make sure that your points work together conceptually--that is, that key points are unified by your essay's theme.

One strategy is to **OUTLINE** your draft. Create an outline of your draft after you've finished writing. Your outline should include:

- I. Your theme as it is stated in your introduction
- II. Topic sentence from the first body paragraph
 - i. example used in first body paragraph that supports the theme
- III. Topic sentence from the second body paragraph
 - i. example used in second body paragraph that supports the theme

and so on.

Examine the outline (which is actually an abbreviated version of your draft): does the organization make sense? Do the topic sentence indicate a conceptual progression of ideas? Does each paragraph's topic sentence **FOCUS** your theme, and does each example **ILLUSTRATE** your main idea?

Step Three: Revise for focus, clarity and depth. Make sure that the skeleton of your personal statement is fleshed out with sufficient examples, fully developed paragraphs, and meaningful prose.

Style Tips

- Examine the personal statement for word accuracy; whenever possible, use a simpler word in place of a longer or more obscure word.

- Make sure that every word you use means what you think it means.
- Be yourself!
- Avoid empty words and phrases like "basically,," "really," "goals and dreams."
- Use active verbs whenever possible. Go through your essay and circle every form of "to be" that you find ("is", "are", "were", etc). Substitute more active verbs. For example:
 - Instead of: My love of science *was fostered* by my second grade teacher
 - Write: My second grade teacher *fostered* my love of science
- Avoid predictable (and stereotypical college essay phrases) such as "I learned a lot," "I learned to work with others," "It was a fun and challenging experience" "I learned that everyone is different," etc.
- Avoid using clichés and proverbs, or other over-used phrases from literary sources. They detract from the freshness of your essay.
- Use a normal, 10-12 point font to type your essay. Don't type in all italics, or in bold, or in an unusual font size. Standard fonts that look nice are Times, Palatino, New York, and Courier. Avoid fancy font types--they are difficult to read.

Proofreading

Leave plenty of time to proofread. If you can, put your essay aside for a few days, and then come back and look at it with fresh eyes.

Some proofreading tips:

- Try reading your essay backwards (last sentence first) to catch fragments or other glaring errors.
- Have another pair of eyes read it as well to catch errors in spelling and grammar--your eyes, because they are used to the words on the page, can easily miss errors that another reader will easily spot.

Avoid these common errors

- Fragments
- Run-on sentences (comma splices)
- Redundancy ("The reason...is because")
- Spelling errors
- Slang or colloquial language

Getting Feedback on Your Personal Statement

Getting feedback from others is a critical part of writing your essay. If your teachers, peers, or parents have suggestions, listen carefully. You don't have to take every suggestion, but try them out and find out which ones work. You'll want to be very specific in asking for feedback; if there are sections of your essay that you are particularly concerned about, ask your readers to pay special attention to those parts.

It is very important that your essay be your own creation and be conveyed in your own words, but it is okay (and even encouraged) to get feedback from others.

When soliciting feedback, steel yourself to criticism. Not everyone will see your essay the way you do. After receiving feedback, and before revising, write down the comments you receive and look for patterns. Use these patterns to decide how to proceed. If every one of your readers thinks that your essay is too wordy, then you can be pretty sure that your essay is too wordy, and revising for a simpler, more natural style should be a top priority.

Help your readers by providing a structure for them to respond. Ask your readers to comment first on larger issues, and lastly on grammar or syntax (problems with which often disappear in a second draft, so commenting extensively on grammar in the first draft is often a waste of your reader's time, particularly if the ideas you wish to convey are still unclear).

Use the following questions as a guide for your readers.

Overall Impression

1. After reading my essay, what three words would you use to describe me?
2. After reading the essay, what do you think its overall theme is?
3. In what way (or where) is the essay most persuasive?
4. In what way (or where) is it least persuasive?

Structure and Organization

5. Is the essay organized in a logical fashion?
6. Are the transitions between paragraphs fluid and logical?
7. Do the paragraphs build upon one another, and move from smaller issues to more significant ones?

Grammar and Syntax

8. Are there grammar errors? If so, what are they?
9. Are the words used appropriate?
10. What other comments/suggestions do you have that will strengthen my essay?